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Penny Morgan: the only waitress in the people's House

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HELENA - Rep. Penny Morgan, a four-term lawmaker from Billings, is almost always a good Republican. She is pro-life. She believes the best budgets are tight ones and frowns upon higher taxes.

But there's a part of Morgan, 48, that splits from her party - the part that puts her hair in an up-do, laces her comfortable shoes and straightens her Red Lobster name tag.

Morgan, a mother of three grown and successful girls, is a waitress. She is the only waitress in the 2009 Legislature.

"I look out for the little guy," she said in a recent interview on the House floor at the Capitol. "I'm an ordinary, everyday working person."

And the Legislature, she said, is sorely lacking in working people.

She seems to relish breaking the myth that all Republicans are rich guys. She said people who recognize her from the Legislature and see her at work don't know if they should say "Hi."

Sometimes, she said, it seems they can't quite believe the person they see hoisting an enormous tray of seafood over her head and chatting amiably with her customers is the same woman who has mastered some of the most important, albeit dense, pages of the state budget.

Morgan hasn't always worked as a waitress; she has started and operated two businesses. If there's a theme running through her life, it's hard work and doing what needs to be done to take care of her family. So, when her marriage broke up three years ago, leaving her with no income, she didn't think twice about taking a job in the service sector.

Besides, she said, "I'm a good waitress."

Morgan was raised in Greycliff, just outside Big Timber. Her parents ran the Big Timber KOA and built the locally-famous Big Timber Water Slide.

Growing up outside Big Timber, Morgan went to a two-room elementary school. Worried that his children would miss out on a better education, Morgan's dad began paying tuition and driving her into town when she started eighth grade.

Morgan was a popular and good student in high school. She graduated second in her class in 1978 and was

offered a scholarship for college.

"But I didn't take it," she said. "I got married."

She and her husband, a truck driver, married that year and moved to Billings. She considered getting out of her small town a breakthrough and has lived in Billings since. She had three children in 10 years, raising them essentially on her own as her husband was often out of town for extended stretches.

She also worked a list of jobs: She sold radio ads, marketed handcrafted gifts and even ran her parents' KOA for a few years.

She and her husband divorced in 1990 after 12 years of marriage. Her youngest daughter was 2 years old.

In 1994, she started her first business, a consignment shop for lightly used infant and children's clothes and furniture called "Once Upon a Child." Of all her occupations, she said, running that store was her favorite.

In a jolt, it burned to the ground in 2001.

"I lost everything," she said. "I woke up one day and didn't have any place to go."

By then, Morgan had remarried. The next year, she ran for the Legislature in House District 57, which covers southwest Billings and the southwest corner of Yellowstone County. A brother of one of her friends was serving in the House at the time and encouraged her to run.

Her first session was the 2003 Legislature, the last time Republicans would hold strong majorities in both houses and the governor's office. The session also featured the post-9/11 state budget free-fall, forcing politicians to make painful cuts and raise money through a series of tax-like surcharges.

In 2002, she had opened her second business, the Coffee Mill cafe in Rimrock Mall. Later she added seven drive-up coffee kiosks in Billings and five in Helena.

Morgan later sold the business and shortly afterward she and her second husband divorced, leaving Morgan with the big house they'd built and no income.

Morgan decided to return to waitressing, an occupation she first took up as a teenager.

She said Red Lobster is a great place to work. It's the only Red Lobster in Montana and is reliably busy. She's able to take leave to serve in the Legislature, and it's a good fit for her outgoing personality.

Morgan also is pursuing a bachelor's degree online, taking classes as she serves in the 2009 Legislature. Many nights she goes home after a long day at the session, only to break out her English composition homework.

Morgan estimates she'll be done in three years, the same time her youngest daughter graduates from Montana State University's architecture program.

Morgan said her diverse life and work experiences have uniquely prepped her to do the people's work as a state representative, particularly working on the budget of the Department of Public Health and Human Services.

This session, she again sits on the budget panel that oversees the sprawling agency, which accounts for 40

percent of the entire state budget. Morgan is the only lawmaker on the panel who has worked on the agency budget before and, as such, is the only one with any institutional knowledge.

Morgan easily rattles off details of the agency's budget and has emerged as a defender of the people the department serves. She has formed alliances with Democrats, particularly Rep. Mary Caferro, D-Helena, who also focuses on fighting for basic services for the poor and the uninsured.

Caferro, herself a single parent, former waitress and, for a time, welfare recipient, is no stranger to Morgan's championing of the disadvantaged.

"I have a lot of respect for her," Caferro said, adding that she didn't think it was an accident that Morgan is in touch with people in need.

"As lawmakers we bring our experiences with us," she said. "They keep us in touch with what's relevant."

In 2003, Morgan pushed for a one-year pilot project that would help poor women stay home with their newborn babies. It paid them the money the state would have paid a child-care provider to watch her children, to help them bond with their young infant.

Although the program wasn't renewed after its one-year run, state analysts later determined it saved Montana taxpayers \$265,000 by reducing child-care costs and encouraging the women to avoid welfare in the future.

Morgan has also been a staunch supporter of the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), a state-federal program that provides health insurance for the children of the working poor. In 2007, she also pushed to expand Medicaid to cover prenatal care for more poor women.

Caferro said it says something about Montana's legislative process that a person working as a waitress could even win a seat in the state's lawmaking body.

"You can run a grass-roots campaign and be up against money and still win," she said.

Morgan said her passions are particularly challenged in this Legislature. The state is not flat-busted now, but no one knows how Montana's economy may fare in the next two years and, so far, state tax revenues are looking bleak. She said she wants to "help people who need it, but not create a hole that is unsustainable."

Figuring out that balancing act is a routine few at the 2009 Legislature seem to have figured out yet.

Not even a woman who is used to balancing plates of lobster and scampi over her head.